

LANGSTON HUGHES AND ZORA NEALE HURSTON



MULE BONE

A COMEDY OF NEGRO LIFE

**EDITED WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
GEORGE HOUSTON BASS AND HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.
AND THE COMPLETE STORY OF THE *MULE BONE* CONTROVERSY**

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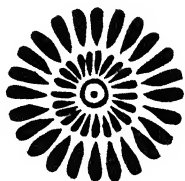
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ZORA NEALE HURSTON**

Edited with Introductions by George Houston Bass
and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
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For
George Houston Bass,
In Memoriam
1938–1990

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PREFACE



M*ule Bone* is a three-act play, jointly written in 1930 by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Because of a dispute between the authors, the origins of which remain mysterious, the play was never performed during the authors' lifetimes. Indeed, only its third and final act was published, and this not until 1964. Drafts of the play were accessible only to scholars, through the Alain Locke Papers at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University and through the Langston Hughes Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale. But the quarrel surrounding the play's authorship has made it an object of great curiosity in Afro-American literary history.

I first heard of the play when reading Langston Hughes's autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940); there, Hughes describes his perception of the affair in a chapter entitled "Literary Quarrel." Two careful and perceptive scholars, Robert Hem-enway and Arnold Rampersad, present meticulous accounts of the controversy in their biographies of Hurston and Hughes.

These three accounts we reprint here, along with much of the archival sources upon which their accounts are based.

It is apparent to the editors that *Mule Bone* was written jointly by Hughes and Hurston, and that their quarrel not only interrupted a productive friendship, it also killed a most promising collaborative team in the theatre, which in turn stifled the development of an African-American theatre based upon black vernacular forms. We can only wonder at the directions that black theatre might have taken in America had *Mule Bone* been produced and published. However, it was not.

The first production of *Mule Bone* is scheduled, at this writing, for February 1991, at the Lincoln Center Theatre, thanks to Gregory Mosher, the Artistic Director; George Bass, executor of the Hughes Estate; and Clifford Hurston, executor of the Hurston Estate. The play has been copyrighted in the names of the authors.

Two days before the editing of this volume was completed, George Houston Bass died quite unexpectedly. Mr. Bass, a professor of Afro-American Studies and founder and Artistic Director of the Rites and Reason Theatre at Brown University, and Langston Hughes's secretary and confidant, had been especially excited about both this edition of *Mule Bone* and about its Lincoln Center premiere, exactly sixty-one years after it was written. Bringing this "lost" work of the Harlem Renaissance to the stage had preoccupied the last two years of his life. Mr. Bass and I designed together every aspect of this volume.

George Bass loved the theatre, as he loved all of literature, and life itself. He had recently edited the complete poems of Langston Hughes and was planning to edit Hughes's collected papers. His devotion to Hughes was total and unflinching. No author's legacy has been better served by an executor than Bass has served Hughes.

It is altogether fitting, then, that this edition of *Mule Bone* and its Lincoln Center premiere are dedicated to George Houston Bass.

H.L.G., JR.

September 20, 1990

MULE BONE

ANOTHER BONE OF CONTENTION:

Reclaiming Our Gift of Laughter

George Houston Bass



In her writing of Afro-American folklore, Zora Neale Hurston has cited the art of laughter as one of black folk's gifts to American culture. Langston Hughes also recognized laughter as one of the great strengths of the Afro-American people. Hurston and Hughes, who combined their creative skills and appreciation for laughter in writing their play *Mule Bone*, are widely recognized masters of the art of "laughing to keep from crying" and of the blues sensibility which is so central to the comic imagination of Afro-American tradition. Hurston mastered the language and lore of southern black American landscape and Hughes claimed black folk sounds and rhythms of the urban north. Their appreciation for the

oral tradition of Afro-American people and their understanding of black folk's use of laughter as a coping mechanism for personal and group survival have made them primary sources of instruction for students of Afro-American history and culture.

Hurston and Hughes adapted *Mule Bone* from a folktale, "The Bone of Contention," which Hurston had collected from her all-black hometown of Eatonville, Florida. The playscript was written during the early months of 1930, a period when images of black people in popular American culture were still shaped by notions of primitivism, exoticism, and minstrelsy. Unlike the contrived images of black folk-life presented in such plays as *The Emperor Jones*, *Porgy*, and *Green Pastures*, the authors of *Mule Bone* envisioned their play as an "authentic" portrayal of black comic characters and the rich uses of language and laughter southern black folk had invented as a way of creatively coping with the harshness of being black in America. Unfortunately, the play was never produced in the authors' lifetimes and in a real sense *Mule Bone* is an unfinished work. The cover page of the draft of the playscript in the Hughes papers at Yale University bears a handwritten note by Langston Hughes that reads, "This play was never done because the authors fell out."

In the spring of 1988, almost sixty years after the script was written, Greg Mosher, Artistic Director of Lincoln Center Theatre, expressed an interest in producing the first known public performance of *Mule Bone*. It was thought that the staging of an unproduced script by two of the most gifted black writers of the twentieth century could make a significant contribution to the American theatre. But, on close reading of the script, it became very clear that a production of the 1930 draft of the text could become quite problematic in terms of the current cultural, social, and political sensibilities of the American public. Rites and Reason Theatre became a collaborator in the task of developing the playscript left by Hur-

ston and Hughes into a viable performance work for a popular theatre audience sixty years after the script was created.

One of the principal issues and creative challenges that has surfaced in the development of the script concerns the use of broad black comic types in the play which can be easily viewed in terms of the stigmas and offensive stereotypes of minstrel shows and the plantation tradition of American literature. A genuine appreciation for the richness of black folk culture and for the genius of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes has allowed us to look beyond the problematic aspects of the text and try to recognize the poetic insights and dramatic possibilities that could have been the thematic focus of the "Negro folk comedy" Hurston and Hughes wanted to create.

The expansion of moral and aesthetic consciousness that has occurred in American society since 1960 has produced a social climate that does not allow one to laugh easily at broad comic interpretations of black people. Many of the comic characters, comic devices, and forms of laughter that were sources of renewal and release within the black community before 1960 are now inhibited by the politics of race and gender. Forms of parody and self-parody which were once a way of dealing with the stress and pain of a bad situation and finding a way to change it are now quite often viewed as assaults and insults.

The millions of black folk who have endured cruel and dehumanizing situations as they inched their way through the years of slavery and Jim Crow laws to the years of the Civil Rights Movement and beyond knew how to use laughter as a tool for regeneration, transformation, and re-creation. They left folk tales, family stories, songs, rhymes, toasts, and jokes that document their great ability and skill in laughing at very ugly conditions. Obviously, they viewed the world quite differently from the black persons who in recent years found

little humor and no cause for laughter in George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* and in Spike Lee's films.

In *Mule Bone*, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes have made very deliberate use of laughter and broad comic characters and devices from Afro-American tradition. The art of "lying" and telling tall tales as well as the art of "signifying" and "putting down" one's friends and neighbors in defining and refining one's sense of self and community are demonstrated by more than two dozen characters from Eatonville who know how to laugh away the overwhelming pains and burdens of hard times. The sense-meaning of their laughter holds the meaning and significance of the playscript Hurston and Hughes have left to us.

A TRAGEDY OF NEGRO LIFE

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.



This play was never done because the authors fell out.

—LANGSTON HUGHES, 1931

And fall out, unfortunately, they did, thereby creating the most notorious literary quarrel in African-American cultural history, and one of the most thoroughly documented collaborations in black American literature. Langston Hughes published an account entitled "Literary Quarrel" as the penultimate chapter—indeed, almost as a coda or an afterthought—in his autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940). Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston's biographer, published a chapter in his biography entitled "Mule Bone," and Arnold Rampersad, Hughes's biographer, presents an equally detailed account in volume one of his *The Life of Langston Hughes*. Only Zora Neale Hurston, of the two principals, did not make public her views of the episode. But she did leave several letters (as did Hughes) in which she explains some of her behavior and feelings. In addition, Hurston left the manuscript of the short story, "The Bone of

Contention," upon which the play was based. These documents—letters, the short story, Hughes's account, and two accounts from careful and judicious scholars—as well as a draft of the text of the play, *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, comprise the full record of the curious history of this brilliant collaboration between two extraordinarily talented African-American writers. We have assembled this archival and published data here to provide contemporary readers with the fullest possible account of a complex and bizarre incident that will forever remain impossible to understand completely, beclouded in inexplicable motivation.

In a sense, this is a casebook of a crucial—and ugly—chapter in the history of the Harlem Renaissance, that extraordinarily rich period in American cultural history that witnessed the birth of jazz, the coming to fruition of the classic blues, and the first systematic attempt to generate an entire literary and cultural movement by black Americans. The Harlem Renaissance, also called "The New Negro Renaissance," is generally thought to have begun in the early 1920s and ended early on in the Great Depression, about the time when Hughes and Hurston had their dispute. The origins of the Renaissance are, of course, complex and have been written about extensively. It is clear, however, that the production of a rich and various black art, especially the written arts and the theatre, could very well help to reshape the public image of black people within American society and facilitate thereby their long struggle for civil rights, a struggle that commenced almost as soon as the last battle of the Civil War ended. As James Weldon Johnson put it in the "Preface" to his *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922):

A people may be great through many means, but there is one by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the